

“The art of making artists”

Canadian Modernism, F.R. Scott, and the New Deal

In his contribution to *On F.R. Scott*, a 1983 volume of essays that celebrates Scott's life and work, Louis Dudek writes of a 1941 lecture that Scott gave at the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal. Dudek remembers that Scott's talk featured slides of American art made possible under the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), a New Deal initiative that provided government funding to artists in need of work. After leading his audience through a catalogue of state-funded visual art, Scott turned to his listeners and, according to Dudek, said something to the effect of “Would these fine paintings be here if we did not have this government sponsored project? See what can be done!” (31). It is likely that Scott had a great deal more to say about the American funding initiatives and the artwork that such sponsorship produced. Nevertheless, Dudek's summary is important because he describes Scott's account of the New Deal system as enthusiastic, and suggests that such a “government sponsored project” offered for Scott and for his fellow modernists not only a story of American success, but also an important model for Canadian possibilities.

Only one year earlier, in 1940, a selection of American artwork funded by the same New Deal initiative toured Canadian museums. The exhibition, which featured sketches for 149 of the murals sponsored by the PWAP, appeared at galleries across Canada, including the National Gallery of Ottawa, the Art Gallery of Toronto, and the Art Association of Montreal. The Canadian press reported that public reaction to the murals was enthusiastic, and also made it clear that public interest was sparked, not only by the art pieces themselves, but also by the system of state funding that had

sponsored the murals' production. Graham McInnes of *Saturday Night*, for example, "hope[d] . . . that the showing [would] stimulate our own Federal government to give thought to a project along similar lines," and an article in the *Ottawa Citizen* claimed that the exhibition showed "what can be done . . . when artists of a country are given an opportunity to disclose their talent under government sponsorship" (qtd. in Brison 139). Jeffrey Brison's *Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Canada: American Philanthropy and the Arts and Letters in Canada* (2005) documents Canadian reaction to the American model, and he argues that Federal One was "the shining example of state support for the arts" for Canadians of the early 1940s (138).

Despite the enthusiasm evoked by the model at the time, the influence of America's New Deal on Canadian artists and audiences seems to have been all but forgotten in readings of Canadian modernism. On the few occasions that the New Deal's Canadian impact has been considered, it has been a simplified and redacted version of the program that has been understood to have translated to the Canadian context. Brison, for example, suggests that the Canadian response to the New Deal ignored the complexity of the project, and that Canadians, in their eagerness to embrace a model of co-operation between the artist and the state, idealized Federal One, the program to fund writers, artists, musicians, and playwrights (138-40). Brison's argument coincides with Michael Szalay's claim, in *New Deal Modernism* (2000), that while Americans understood the complications and complex trade-offs of the New Deal, the program "remained powerfully [coherent] abroad" (274). Despite these claims to unified presentation and wholesale acceptance, the New Deal provided a complicated model for Canadian artists, who recognized that the framework presented both substantial benefits and real dangers to the artist in need of work. A reconsideration of Canadian modernism with New Deal tensions in mind demonstrates that Canadian artists were acutely aware of the inevitable ideological conflict that surfaces when artists must attempt to achieve an impossible balance between personal commitments, both artistic and political, and government-imposed regulations. The work of F.R. Scott, in particular, highlights the ambiguities of the New Deal proposal; reading Scott in relation to the New Deal provides fresh insight on both the artistic concerns of the time and the multiple influences that would come to shape Canada's commitment to government-sponsored art.

His position as an influential political and artistic figure makes Scott a useful lens through which to view the questions and complications of

Canada's New Deal modernism. Although Scott considered himself a poet first and foremost, his full-time practice as a constitutional lawyer in Quebec made him one of the foremost legal experts in Canada. Indeed, for his work in that realm, he has been called an "advocate of civil liberties and architect of modern Canadian thought on human rights and fundamental freedoms" (Tarnopolsky 133), and he is remembered for his opposition to Premier Maurice Duplessis' Padlock Law of 1937, for his advocacy for religious freedom and free speech, and for his defence of the constitutionalization of human rights. All of this work has been carefully documented by Sandra Djwa in her biographical history of Scott, *The Politics of the Imagination* (1987), and by Robert May in his 2003 dissertation, "'Make this *Your* Canada': F.R. Scott and the Poetics of Social Justice in Canada, 1922-1982." Both Djwa and May relate the details of Scott's life, charting his legal and political careers and drawing attention to his numerous publications in both fields. These studies convincingly argue that a theme runs through Scott's work and life: as both Djwa's and May's titles indicate, Scott attempted throughout his life to reconcile his political and artistic callings, which were "ineluctably bound up in each other" (May, "Make" 40). Because of his conviction that art must reflect the circumstances of its day, Scott provides a useful starting point for a consideration of the impact of the New Deal on Canadian poets.

Even before the sharp downturn in the fall of 1929 that marked the beginning of the Depression, Canadian artists felt themselves pulled between their ideological convictions and the pressures of the market. In "Wanted: Canadian Criticism" (1928), A.J.M. Smith discusses the dilemma that Canadian writers, and especially those writers who wanted to use their work to voice political convictions, seemed to face: they could either remain true to their beliefs and starve, or abandon their ideals and write work that would sell. The choice between artistic commitment and material survival is, according to Smith, a result of a misinterpretation of the value of art. Modern society collapses the distinction "between commerce and art," and the resulting "confusion" may tempt Canadian writers "to effect a compromise" (600). As Smith warns, the artist who chooses to maintain his political commitment often "finds himself without an audience, or at least without an audience that will support him" (600). Smith's diagnosis of the artist's condition proved to be even more applicable just one year later, as Canada's Depression-era artists worked to prove their relevance to a public that thought itself to be without the money or leisure time necessary for art appreciation.

While the New Deal—and especially Federal One—had begun to address the difficult position of the American artist, the program did not fully mend the disjunction that Smith observed between the desire for artistic freedom and the necessity of a liveable income. In attempting to bridge this gap, in fact, Federal One initiatives highlighted the difficult questions that arise from artistic sponsorship. What did it mean, for example, for an artist to be unemployed? As Harold Rosenberg, the American artist and art editor of the New Deal-commissioned *American Guide Series*, explained, “It seemed easy to raise painting to the level of a profession when members of most professions had nothing to do” (197). But finding employment for out-of-work artists raised complicated questions about definitions: how was an artist’s labour to be valued? What made for a working artist? Should an artist be compensated for his working hours, or for a finished project? What permitted a citizen to classify herself as an artist? Would artistic merit or an artist’s need determine employability? The question of aesthetic standards quickly grew complicated. If only a certain class of artist was to be employed, who was fit to judge the quality of the finished work? Such questions led to a radical rethinking of the purpose and value of art in the modern nation.

Szalay argues that these and other complications that arise with the New Deal model surface in the aesthetics of American writing of the time. In removing the element of chance from artistic success by paying artists for their time rather than for their finished product, Federal One encouraged artists to adopt “new ways of conceiving literary labour” (Szalay 5). The redefinition of artistic labour shifted the emphasis from product to process and worked to blur the boundary between artist and audience. This shift appealed to the leftist- and socialist-leaning artists of the era, who were sympathetic to the plight of the workers because it allowed them to identify themselves with the proletariat, having also sacrificed control over the product of their labour. Of course, as Szalay argues, offering artists a wage for their work also meant that Federal One employees had an interest in maintaining the capitalist system and in avoiding any work that could be construed as leaning too far to the left. It was as if the New Deal’s arts administration was able to take the difficulties that the project initially encountered—the questions of who would qualify as an artist and what makes for good art—and make these complications work to Federal One’s advantage in a manner that both contained and appeased the artists on its payroll.

Because the Depression had distanced much of the public from the world of art, the New Deal aimed to reconceptualize not only artistic labour, but

also art appreciation, reconnecting the public to its art and reaffirming the place of art in everyday America. New Deal artists would transform what it meant to consume art, eradicating the necessity of ownership and thereby removing artistic creation from the commercial realm. Such a rethinking would both shelter art from the rise and fall of the economy and would work to generalize the power of the artist to the community at large. The ideals of this reconfiguration were best achieved through the public mural, the form that came to provide the New Deal's metaphor of ideal artistic production. The murals, twenty-five hundred of which were funded by the PWAP, became a community effort rather than an individual's product, and were removed from concerns of private ownership. Murals were painted on the walls of post offices, schools, and hospitals throughout the US—public locations that were meant to make art conspicuous—freeing it from the confines of the gallery and placing it in the realm of the everyday.

The local community was encouraged to become involved in mural production: artists submitted proposals for how a space might be used, and community members had the opportunity to comment on the sketch and offer suggestions for improvement, most of which concerned the work's relationship to its context.¹ Jane Sherron DeHart, writing about the legacy of the American mural project, suggests that the government's goal in endorsing the mural format was to rethink entirely the interaction between artists and audiences. The mural, DeHart explains, was artistic democracy at its best, since the public space of production "provided unexpected opportunities for [community] participation as onlookers queried painters about subject matter and technique, volunteered criticism and suggestions, and thus turned the production of a mural into a community endeavour" (323). Ideally, the community as a whole would take pride in the work, and the demarcation between artist and community would be further blurred. In revaluing artistic contribution, the artists—and the system—redefined both production and consumption.

Such a model of communication and consensus was the ideal, but the process of seeking community consent did not always run smoothly. Even when the community approved, the state could intervene to censor any project. Just how radical state-funded art could be was one of the main tensions of the era. The controversy over Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads*, commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller for the Rockefeller Center in New York in 1933, would have been fresh in the minds of the PWAP muralists working in the mid-1930s. Between the approval of his sketch

and the mural's execution, Rivera made a now legendary change: a figure whose face was concealed in the original plan was transformed in the nearly finished mural to a clearly visible portrait of Vladimir Lenin (Marnham 256). The clash of ideologies was too great to stand. Rockefeller paid Rivera's fee in full, but he prevented him from finishing his project; soon after, Rockefeller had the mural destroyed. Rivera's story was to colour Federal One funding from its very beginnings. In announcing the program, Roosevelt insisted that the government would never endorse "a lot of young enthusiasts painting Lenin's head on the Justice building" (qtd. in Mankin 77). The government would maintain final control over state-sponsored art. Federal One artists were continually made aware of the source of their income, and they knew by example the risks of contravening the government's—or the American public's—accepted ideals. Artists of the day would have been well aware of the power of the state or community to pre-empt their visions.² Artists who attempted to use their art to express revolutionary political and ideological convictions were often censored by the same economic system that had provided them with space to work in the first place.

The era's very public attempts to establish the value and boundaries of artistic labour provide new perspective on Scott's 1935 poem, "Mural." Placing "Mural" within its social moment—reading it alongside Scott's interests in social, economic, and artistic reform, and remembering his investment in Federal One—gives new significance to a poem that gestures even in its title to the necessary connection between artistic product and community response. In a note to the poem, Scott writes, "This is as near as I can get to a credible Utopia." Critics have long debated how to read Scott's statement. Some take him at his word, arguing that "Mural" represents Scott's dream for a socialist and egalitarian future. Along these lines, Wanda Campbell suggests that "Mural" is "Scott's private proposal for an alternative society" (3). According to this perspective, "Mural" is the poetic correlative of Scott's political work of the same year, *Social Planning for Canada* (1935), which would form the basic platform of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. Other critics, including Frank Watt, insist that Scott's note must be read satirically, and that "Mural" is a "mocking vision," "closer to the negative Utopias of Huxley and Orwell than to any actual world we might choose to live in" (62). The debate's longevity testifies to what Stephen Scobie calls Scott's "profoundly ambiguous" stance (314): "Mural" lends support to both arguments, since the ideal and the real are continually contrasted. Rather than a fault of the poem, such uncertainty is key: Scott's poetic

portrait of a future society pulled in conflicting directions parallels his qualified optimism for the PWAP. He builds his poem on the symbol of the public mural, which by 1935 had come to represent both artistic democracy in action and the censorial power of the state.

“Mural” presents overlapping visual images of the future in comparison with scenes of the present, with a continual focus on some of the most basic elements of daily life, including birth, nourishment, and work, and with an attention to the everyday that parallels the focus of so many New Deal muralists. Like other murals, including Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads*, “Mural” presents possibilities for the daily life of the future. These possibilities, introduced consistently with the word “when,” suggest that humanity’s needs will be satisfied efficiently in the new system, without the oppression and subjugation that was once such a familiar aspect of everyday life; each of these advancements, however, comes at a cost. A switch to mechanized vegetarianism, for example, in which food is produced “fresh and clean / From some unbreakable machine” (5-6), results in happier animals, but it also risks humanity’s disconnection from the natural world. Such “dialled feast[s]” (51) are both clean and convenient, but their achievement is ambiguous: is the attainment of a “conscience smooth as metal plate” (53) something to be celebrated or mourned?

The world that Scott represents in “Mural” seems to have banished oppression, but it has simultaneously gained a mechanistic and dehumanized quality that exists in tension with the statements of improvement. Procreation itself has been made more efficient, and conception and money are connected—“sperm sold in cubes” (22). Had this society been Scott’s true Utopia, it would have moved beyond the bounds of capitalism, so this connection suggests that there is something tainted in the birth of this new world. Like the farmers’ fields, which will be exchanged for “crops . . . raised in metal trays / Beneath the ultra-violet rays” (8-9), children of the future will grow in a sterile setting: in an assembly-line production, the “Paternal sperm” is combined with “ova [that] swell in Huxleyan tubes” (22, 21), an allusion that must surely signal the hubris of attempts to regulate biology.³ Once hatched, the “babies nuzzle buna taps / As sucklings now the unsterile paps” (23-24).⁴ Society is harvesting not only “wormless fruits and vintage wines” (12) but also children from the “cool assembly-lines” (11). The poem’s speaker does not comment on these details, but he instead lists them one after another in a catalogue that supports the divergent critical interpretations.

Like other inconveniences of the past, inequality makes a brief appearance in the new world to mark the progress of the present state. "[P]overty" enters the depiction only to allow the speaker to clarify that the word has lost all meaning (43-44).⁵ Despite the avowed disconnect from the previous era, "Mural" includes traces of injustice that remain legible in elements that carry over from the old system: parents are presented with "choices" of "coloured skin" (36, 35) for their unborn children, which hints at the end of racism, but the reduction of race to aesthetics carries a disturbing suggestion of eugenics, gesturing, perhaps, to the Sexual Sterilization Acts of Alberta (1928) and British Columbia (1933) (see McWhirter and Weijer). As much as the defeat of racism, such "choices" might signal a reorientation of the system so that no one is confronted with issues of injustice, a far more ambiguous prospect.

The future society that Scott imagines in "Mural" has at its centre a remnant of an earlier time. The "gentle, low, electric hum" (38), a sound that is neither wholly positive nor negative,⁶ permeates the "Eden air" (37). The "electric hum" is the sound of the "Apotheosis of the Wheel" (39), or the exaltation of technology to the level of deity, a dangerous prospect among a citizenry that has already been attributed with a "bloodless background" (55) and "stainless state" (54), phrases that signal both technological advancement and a mechanized, less-than-human quality.⁷

Scobie calls the Wheel couplet the poem's "most direct and unambiguous denunciation" (318), but even here, "Mural" refuses such certainty. Because its sound is a "lingering echo of the strife / That crushed the old pre-technic life" (41-42), the Wheel serves to remind citizens of the contrast between their past and present. Like the "grey storehouse" (85) at the heart of Archibald Lampman's "Land of Pallas," the Wheel reminds citizens that things were once worse. Of course, the Wheel "cannot think and cannot feel" (40), and the repetition of the negative "cannot" brings a condemnatory tone to the line, but even a more pessimistic reading of the Wheel must admit that, because its sound is now an "echo," it lacks the strength it once had. It remains unclear whether the concluding reference to the looming "colossal commonweal" (58) is worth the sacrifices its pursuit has necessitated, or whether the "Wheel"—echoed, significantly, in "commonweal"—will again crush its society's inhabitants.⁸

Both Campbell and Scobie have noted the "ambiguity at the heart of [Scott's] verse" between "the satiric target and the Utopian ideal" (Campbell 1). In "Mural" and elsewhere, Scott presents "contrasting meanings in their most

concise forms” (Scobie 314) and leaves his reader to determine which vision he supports and which he condemns. At times, as in “Social Notes I” (1932) and “Social Notes II” (1935), for example, Scott’s strategy is to present details of the present day and allow their shortcomings to speak for themselves, “tacitly suggest[ing] a more socially just alternative” (May, “F.R. Scott” 35). In “Mural,” Scott’s catalogue has a more complicated effect, thanks to the “totally admirable concept[s]” placed alongside his darker visions (Scobie 318). While the ambiguity of “Mural” can be appreciated for its own sake, in that the indeterminacy challenges readers to consider the elements of their ideal society, it is difficult to place Scott’s projected social order on the side of either Utopia or dystopia, and this difficulty is part of the poem’s strategy.

The poem’s form adds to its ambiguity: both the Wheel’s “gentle, low, electric hum” (38) and the earlier “mechanic drone” (14) suggest a consistent and regularized background noise to the new society. Scott’s rhyme and rhythm could be said to echo this “mechanic drone.” His relatively regular iambic tetrametre, rhyming couplets, and anaphoric use of both “when” and “and” give the poem a predictability that mirrors the unheeded warning that the other noises should have provided to residents. Such regularity, when combined with the warnings of unchecked technological devotion, might suggest the dangers of the mechanization of art, particularly in 1935, when artistic labour was being entirely reconceived. Campbell rightly notes that “[d]espite the poem’s title, the position of art in this new society is never made clear” (8): while the responsibilities of the artist are not explicitly addressed, the poem presents one possible model for artistic engagement, demonstrating the sorts of protest possible under a censored system. The regularized form of “Mural” suggests the possibility of art that conforms to societal expectations but nevertheless manages to convey criticism.

The future depicted in “Mural” both celebrates and calls into question the nature of progress, a tentative warning that can be linked to Scott’s socialist writings of the time and, especially, to “The New Gradualism” (1936): here, Scott calls for a careful and qualified move to socialism, but also warns that too much compromise could be more dangerous than none, since compromise “must lead on steadily toward the planned and socialized economy, or it will be a mere lull before the fascist storm” (13).⁹ The same warning extends to the artist of the day. The implicit caution in “Mural” anticipates the concern that Scott will later make clear: there are inevitable dangers, both to society and to its art, in recruiting artists as the spokespeople of government policy. At the same time, a close reading of

“Mural” demonstrates the necessity of making strategic use of the existing system, however imperfect, to voice artist’s concerns and criticisms. The ultimate effect of recruiting artists to produce on the state’s behalf remains ambiguous: the project has significant potential, but it simultaneously risks co-opting voices that would otherwise push society to revolution.

Others, too, were searching for a Canadian parallel to Federal One, and some were more wholly optimistic than Scott about the American model. The Kingston Conference of 1941 brought together artists inspired by the example of New Deal, who met “to form a permanent association of Canadian artists and to consider how to establish a financially beneficial relationship with the state” (Brison 143). André Biéler, one of the conference organizers, suggests in the Preface to the conference’s published proceedings that the gathering was planned for “the study and discussion of the position of the artist in our society . . . and the welfare of art in Canada” (v), and that Canada would do well “to look to the United States” and to its Federal One program, which has permitted a “great advance in the happy relation of the artists to their society” (v). Among the attendees of this conference was Marian Dale Scott, who was two years later commissioned to create her own public mural for the McGill School of Medicine. She wrote about this experience in *The Canadian Forum*, echoing the New Deal belief in the need to recognize the artist’s connection to the community:

I, like so many painters of today, was feeling disturbed and inadequate in the isolation of the studio. No doubt the war is partly responsible for this desire to leave the studios, the ivory towers. But perhaps the real cause is even wider and deeper. Perhaps it is all part of the struggling death of the old era, the birth of the new. Since the industrial revolution the artist has been exceptionally isolated. His work has been mainly ignored or misunderstood by his society, and when bought, it has been mainly as luxury goods. . . . But today there are many signs of a change of attitude by both society and the artist. There are many indications that society is recognising the need of the arts as a part of creative living. And there are signs everywhere that the artist wants again to be integrated with the moving forces of his age. (19)

The call to move down from the “ivory towers” and into the streets is echoed in the pages of *Preview* and *First Statement*. No doubt such insistence on connection is primarily a result of the tumultuous times, but it must also be traced to the New Deal’s commitment to the erasure of boundaries between artist and audience. Writers of the era often expressed the desire to minimize the distance between artist and audience and so democratize and collectivize art, an aspiration that finds its form in the documentary and social-realist

work of the period. This impulse is reflected in the tendency towards literary amalgamation, as evidenced, for example, in the country's numerous little magazines.

Canada's own failed "New Deal," as Prime Minister R.B. Bennett's 1935 proposed reform measures came to be known, was clearly a response to the American model. During five radio speeches to the nation, Bennett laid out a rough outline of his vision for national change, which aimed to pull Canadians out of the Depression through "a uniform minimum wage and a uniform maximum work week" (2.14), as well as unemployment insurance, health insurance, and reform to old age pensions. Nine months after this address, in October 1935, Bennett lost the federal election to William Lyon Mackenzie King and the Liberal Party, and in January 1937, most of Bennett's more substantial reform measures were declared by Canada's Privy Council to be matters of provincial rather than national jurisdiction and were thus overturned. In a 1937 article reviewing the Privy Council's decision, Scott called the outcome proof of the "welter of confusion and stupidity" ("Privy Council" 238) into which the Canadian constitution had sunk. He explains that the British North America Act guarantees that national legislation take precedence over provincial jurisdiction in case of "abnormal circumstance," and he regrets that he lacks the space to explore fully "why the judicial mentality does not consider the world economic depression to be an 'abnormal circumstance'" (237). He argues that reforms to Canada's economy would have benefitted the nation not only during its most difficult times, but also every day, since such changes would have led to a more balanced and fair state.

Canada had not followed Roosevelt's model for recovery, but Scott's anger over missed opportunities did not prevent him from advocating change and a recrafting of the state that would incorporate the Canadian artist. Even after the Depression had ended and after Federal One's official demise, Scott campaigned with the Canadian Writers Committee (CWC) for a system of secure and permanent government funding for artists. Significantly, however, the CWC made the case for funding "without state control" (Djwa 262): having witnessed the complications of the American system and the divided loyalties of artists conflicted between working for reform and securing an income,¹⁰ Scott pressed for artistic freedom. In a report submitted to the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, or the Massey-Lévesque Commission, in 1950, Scott and the CWC warn of the dangers of neglecting Canadian writers, since "the flood of American periodicals shipped into this country, the large number of radio programs

fed in from the United States and the Niagara of American advertising" threaten to drown out Canadian voices: "The fault is not America's but ours" (2). The solution, the CWC claimed, is "the development of a little Canadian independence," which must at this point mean both of the nation from American influences and of the artist from government control: the artist must "earn a living from her work," but "care must be taken that subsidization does not stifle artistic freedom" (3). The American New Deal prioritized finding local solutions; the same nationalism is present in the CWC submission to the Massey-Lévesque Commission. Notably, it was the American system that motivated the proposal for funding in the first place, and it was the dangers evident in the American system that partially prompted the warning about independence. It was both the promise and the threat of the American model that led to the solution found in the formation of the Canada Council in 1957, which provides funding at arm's length from government.

Scott called on the government to allow artists the space to advocate change and all citizens the space to engage with the arts: participation in one's culture, Scott insisted with his fellow members of the League for Social Reconstruction in *Social Planning for Canada* (1935), should be a human right. Although capitalism considers culture "a luxury to be acquired or indulged in by a privileged class," a fair society will understand culture "as a quality of life, intrinsic in a society, of which all individuals will normally partake" (35). He repeatedly voiced his belief in participatory democracy, and he relied on an artistic metaphor to make his point. The call to each citizen to consider herself an artist with the power to reshape society finds direct expression in Scott's "The State as a Work of Art," a lecture delivered in 1950 at McGill as part of the Department of Architecture's "Search for Beauty" series. Here, Scott insists that society is a work of art, crafted and capable of being recrafted, and that each citizen can and must contribute to society's redesign. The great power of the law lies in its potential to be redrafted, revised, and improved; and it is this adaptability that allows for the possibility of building a "beautiful social order" (12). Scott's lecture centres itself on such potential:

If everything man makes and builds is a language, I fear that we Canadians have so far spoken more in prose than in poetry. Yet we can create a beautiful social language though our daily work of making and building a society, and in this sense the social order is a work of art and we ourselves are the artists. (9)

Scott's use of the first-person plural frames his lecture as an invitation to change, and it reconfirms his belief that a community in which each

member is empowered as an artist is most likely to craft a fair, balanced, and just society.

Scott's chief example of a "beautiful social order" ("State" 12) is the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the 1933 New Deal project that provided both cheaper electricity and much-needed employment to communities living in poverty. Scott's admiration for the project is clear. He asks, "Is this not something more than just good government and good economics? Is it not more than social justice? Is it not also beautiful in the aesthetic sense of the word?" (14). The TVA, he suggests, extended beyond balance and the idea of fair as equitable, towards fair as beautiful. Scott was aware that his adversaries would be quick to dismiss the idea of the beautiful as forever in the eye of the beholder—how can a society shape itself according to the beautiful if its members cannot agree on the parameters of beauty?—and he is democratic in his solution. "Maybe all we need," he suggests, "is more artists with awakened social consciousness to unveil for us the beauty that may lie hidden under social forms" (10). He argues that a society that encourages each member to search out the beautiful and to transform her life and the life of her community accordingly moves beyond fair as just and toward fair as beautiful. Scott ends his lecture with this hope:

Politics is the art of making artists. It is the art of developing in society the laws and institutions which will best bring out the creative spirit which lives in greater or less degree in every one of us. The right politics sets as its aim the maximum development of every individual. Free the artist in us, and the beauty of society will look after itself. (17)¹¹

In a formulation that answers multiple overlapping concerns, including Smith's 1928 complaint of uninterested audiences, the New Deal's attempts to free the definition of art from the limitations of ownership, and his own political attempts to broaden democratic participation, Scott suggests that extending beauty will mean encouraging more people to see with the eyes of the artist. The liberated individual will act in the best interests of the collective, and the society that results will be the Utopia that "Mural" gestures to but cannot quite imagine: the world of artists free to create and regenerate a fair community.

On 16 February 1933, the day he titles as "Day of news of attempt on Roosevelt's life," Scott records his response on hearing the news. His outrage coalesces not around Roosevelt in particular, but instead around the "flagrant injustice" of the discrepancy between rich and poor in Canada and beyond. Such inequality is bound to lead to "a growth of assassination,"

since “desperate men will be goaded beyond endurance, and will throw away their lives in a gesture of defiance and complaint” (qtd. in Djwa 117). What was necessary, Scott argued, was “a supreme act of sympathy and justice” (117), a reformulation that would provide each citizen with the room to be heard. The attempt on Roosevelt’s life prompted such a reaction because, although he had yet to take office, Roosevelt represented the possibility of hope. Roosevelt’s campaign pledge of a New Deal for the American people promised an equitable redistribution, and, as Djwa suggests, “seemed to prove the state could provide social justice” (118). Even Roosevelt, however, even the New Deal, would not be enough. Scott’s work, critical and creative, insists that a fair society cannot wait for government permission to provide for all, since the need is immediate. Artists must be central to this revolution, but their contribution cannot be scripted in advance, nor can they become puppets for the state in return for a living wage. Scott’s conviction would change the possibilities for Canadian artists.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Dean Irvine and David Bentley, who read earlier versions of this paper and offered generous and valuable criticism. Thanks also to *Canadian Literature*’s anonymous readers, whose reports provided numerous helpful suggestions.
For examples of such community response, see the notes included in *Exhibition of Mural Designs for Federal Buildings*. Community reaction generally concerned details of flora and fauna that needed to be adjusted to better suit the local character, but sometimes, public participation took a more serious and censorious nature. The editors of this catalogue reassured audiences that community disagreement “rather than discouraging the American artist reassures him of the interest which the general public is taking in the art going into its federal buildings. He is at last in touch with the people” (25).
- 2 Ben Shahn, a Federal One muralist who had worked as Rivera’s assistant on *Man at the Crossroads*, later faced a similar censorship scandal in his own work. Shahn’s *Resources of America* (1938-39), a mural for the Bronx Central Post Office, included content that Bronx Reverend Ignatius W. Cox labelled in a Sunday sermon as “Irreligion in Art” (Linden 252). The community demanded that the work be changed before Shahn’s commission be paid. Shahn objected to Cox’s attack, but “in the interest of finishing his mural, Shahn acquiesced” (253). In a 1939 proposal for the St. Louis post office, Shahn contrasted American ideals to the country’s increasingly narrow immigration policies; the government-appointed judging panel rejected the proposal, citing the work’s “political distractions” (256).
- 3 As both Scobie and Campbell have noted, the allusions to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) are numerous: here, Scott draws on the novel’s Fertilizing Room and Hatcheries. That the “carefree lovers shall . . . tune-in coloured symphonies / To prick their elongated bliss” (47-50) is another allusion to Huxley, this time to the feelies of the *Brave New World*.
- 4 In 1935, “buna taps” would have represented the latest scientific advancement in synthetic rubber. Buna was a 1933 German development named for its main chemicals (butadiene and natrium), and its development was tied to Germany’s project of self-sufficiency. Thus “buna,”

- like Scott's other technological references in "Mural," signals both the potential benefits and the dangers of scientific advancement. For more on the history of buna, see Howard.
- 5 That even the meanings of the words marking inequality have been lost recalls William Morris' *News From Nowhere* (1890), where William Guest finds that the inhabitants of the future society he visits do not understand the meaning of the coins he pulls from his pockets: they have lost the system that the symbols represented, leaving the objects meaningless.
 - 6 That the hum is "electric" alludes, again, to *Brave New World*, where the hatcheries are powered by "[t]he hum of the electric motor" (12).
 - 7 The influence of Scott's work on *Social Planning For Canada* (1935) is clear: the editors of this investigation began by querying the world's "faith in progress" (4) and argues that "the 19th and 20th centuries disregarded the obvious social consequences of an aggressively advancing industrialism" (5).
 - 8 Beyond echoing the poem's earlier warnings of destruction, "commonweal" signals its link to Scott's true ideal, since *Commonweal* was the name of the journal produced by the Socialist League in Britain from 1885-1895. William Morris served as *Commonweal's* editor from its inception until 1890, the same year that *News from Nowhere* was originally published in the journal (Cary 175, 209). "Wheel" also invokes its homophone, "weal": a wound, a raised scar. Finally, it is worth noting that Scott's rhyme (zeal / commonweal) had earlier appeared in E.J. Pratt's "The Great Feud" (1926). Here, the "female anthropoidal ape" (247) offers "rousing martial speeches" (93) to encourage her fellow mammals to defend their territory against the creatures of the sea: it was her encouragement that "Kept up to fever heat their zeal / For the imperilled commonweal" (94-95). In this instance, the creatures' "zeal" led to their destruction and to the end of the commonweal, an outcome that lends credence to the suggestion that Scott's final lines in "Mural" serve as a warning.
 - 9 Scott's famous satires, including "WLMK" (1954), show that he realized the dangers of unprincipled compromise.
 - 10 Having lived and worked in the United States while funded by a Guggenheim fellowship from 1940 to 1941, Scott would have witnessed some of these battles at first hand.
 - 11 Such belief in the amelioratory potential of artistic expression is reminiscent of William Morris's artistic theories, which are themselves deeply influenced by John Ruskin.

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